

## Kwame

The yellow wallpaper was staining near the ceiling in a faint smoke line that ringed the room. The air was heavy with the pungent odor of spice, which filled the space with its distinctive cinnamon aroma. From the ceiling hung a gilded chandelier, with four electric lamps cupping upwards in a glass floral arrangement. Orange smoke swam around the incandescent bulbs, playing tricks with the flickering lights. The parlor was packed with people. Men bearing monocles and mustaches wagged their chins as women sporting the latest fashions from Chambeaux chattered amongst themselves. Kwame tugged at the ill-fitting, white servant's uniform he borrowed from the man he bribed to gain entry to the event. It was uncomfortable, but once he had put the turban on, it did not take much to convince the wealthy denizens of the salon that he was just another faceless *raji*, there to serve them wormwood jenever.

The sweltering room's stuffiness indicated that it was too small for the spectators who had ostensibly flocked to see Erebum's two most prominent statesmen debate the merits of the Kokom Laws. However, the crowd's din made it difficult for Kwame to hear anything the debaters were saying. From what Kwame could gather, the laws seemed to be a set of antiquated tariffs that were "disrupting free trade" and contributing to famines on the outlying islands of the Erebite archipelago. But he had little interest in the intricacies of Erebite politics and, from what he saw, neither did the crowd. Most people were focusing on Reginald Potswathe, the famous explorer. He had commandeered a corner of the salon to flaunt a woman he had met during his travels in Qi. The woman was stunning, wearing a stately, sapphire silk gown embroidered with a crane beneath a red sun, an insignia denoting a high scholarly rank in the Emperor's court. This dissonance piqued Kwame's interest, as her status did not befit Reginald's trophy exhibition of

her. However, Kwame could not allow himself to be distracted. His attention remained solely on one of the members of the audience.

Lord Gastonby, Chancellor of the Noble Thing, wore a garish plaid waistcoat beneath a black frock coat. The waistcoat's pattern of red and green stripes checkered with yellow made him look like an ailing bumblebee. His wife wore a "freedom dress", a homemade gown that consisted of a skirt draped over *raji*-style pantaloons. This style of dress was relatively new, championed by the Practical Dress Society, a dress reform organization which had recently elected Lady Gastonby as chairwoman, much to the chagrin of her husband. They had arrived with Lady Winander, who was already unconscious, splayed ungracefully across a divan in a spice-induced stupor. Her husband, the Proper Reputable Lord Winander was supposedly out of the country on business. Kwame had been involved with the Trading Guild long enough to know that the aristocrat was actually in Tamrapor, holed up in some brothel with his colleagues. No doubt Lady Winander suspected on some level that things were amiss and had taken to spice to numb the pain. Perhaps it had even granted her the sight so she could spy on him wherever he went.

A waiter approached the trio and offered them a plate of crispy canapés. Lady Gastonby accepted them graciously and motioned for her husband to try. As she was biting down, her eyes lit up. But the lord was infuriated when he saw what was on the plate.

"Is that prosciutto on my peach canapés?" He demanded. He did not wait for an answer before knocking the silver tray out of the waiter's hands. He stood up, incensed, and struck the server with the back of his hand so hard that it brought him to the ground.

“Get out of my sight,” He barked at his help before turning to Lady Gastonby, “And you! Vomit up that filth.”

The Lady blushed, and scurried away. The row had attracted some attention from onlookers, but as soon as Lady Gastonby left the room, conversations resumed. Kwame chuckled to himself. It was ironic that a man so steeped in blood would be a vegetarian. Luckily, the chaos had opened an opportunity, so Kwame strode towards the lord to clean up the mess at his feet.

As Lord Gastonby saw Kwame approach, he signalled to him and gave him instructions, “Take Lady Winander outside for some air. The state she is in is unbecoming of a woman.”

Kwame bowed and turned to Lady Winander, who was now sitting up. Her eyes were open, but she wasn't present. Kwame gently touched her shoulder, “M'lady? The lord would like me to take you outside. Perhaps you would like a breath of fresh air?”

Lady Winander looked at Kwame suspiciously but allowed him to help her up. They made their way to the terrace outside. The moon was full and bright, casting the garden in a pallid glow. This was Kwame's chance. Lady Winander was intoxicated and quite impressionable. She would probably be open to sharing secrets about Lord Gastonby. But before he could begin asking her questions, she interrogated him.

“You're black, but you're not a raji,” she stated matter-of-factly, “Who are you and what do you want?”

Her seriousness caught Kwame off guard. He hesitated before responding, “You're right. My name is Kwame Okamfe. I was born in Rakesh but now I serve the Trading Guild. My superiors believe that Lord Gastonby has violated the Guild's monopoly and engaged in illegal

slave trading. I'm here to investigate him and was hoping that you could help me. Perhaps we could exchange information? I can offer details about your husband."

Lady Winander was unmoved, "There is nothing you possess that I desire. I have the sight, I know full well where my husband is and what he is doing."

Kwame's stomach dropped. He had been too quick to expose himself. The lady noticed his expression and put her hand on his shoulder to reassure him. She spoke in a soothing voice, "No need to worry. Your secret is safe with me. I won't tell the lord that you're a spy... On one condition."

Lady Winander encroached upon Kwame as she purred. He could feel her eyes scanning his body. The sinking feeling worsened. He mustered the courage to utter the vexing question, "What condition?"

Lady Winander bit her lip, "My husband has been unfaithful. In fact, I can see him right now as if he were there." She pointed towards a marble bench nearby.

"He's there, being unfaithful right now," She said, that distant look returning to her eyes.

Kwame deflected, "Would you like me to retaliate? Do something to hurt your husband?"

Lady Winander ogled him, "In a way... I want you to ravish me."

This was what Kwame had feared as soon as the conversation had taken this turn. He pointedly averted his gaze. But Lady Winander grasped his nauseated face in her ivory hand, forcing him to return her salacious stare.

She smiled and said, "I know what your people do in the bush. The orgies you have to satisfy your gods. I want a taste of that. Take me to the hedge and have your way with me."

It took all of Kwame's strength not to roll his eyes. This woman was insufferably ignorant. She must have learned everything she knew about Rakesh from Potswathe's travel journals. The man was a notorious philanderer with a tendency to embellish tales of his sexual escapades abroad. But Lady Winander had him cornered. There was no escape, and everything would be for naught if he was caught now.

"Don't worry," she assured him, "I have my own special techniques too. The spice grants me the power to attain pleasures some consider to be unnatural. You will have that pleasure too."

Kwame was repulsed, a roaring whirlpool churning in his innards. Lady Winander was now dragging him away behind the hedge. Kwame wondered what force compelled him to follow her and then remembered the spice. She was already controlling his body. He could see that Lady Winander was muttering something under her breath, no doubt some spell. He went limp as he lost sensation in his limbs and tumbled to the ground. Lady Winander began to undress him. She started with his turban and then slowly unbuttoned his white uniform, revealing his apprehensively palpitating chest. Kwame's screams were trapped in paralyzed lips

"No!" the yell came suddenly out of nowhere, as a door slammed in the distance. The momentary distraction was enough to break the spell. Kwame felt command of his arms return and he rapidly grabbed Lady Winander in a chokehold. The lady yelped before he managed to cover her mouth with his left hand. He squeezed tight with his right elbow and held on for his life as the vitality drained from Lady Winander's eyes. He sat there for a seeming eternity, crushing her windpipe well after he knew she was dead. The only thing that brought him back to reality was the gasp he heard from the person who was now standing in front of him. He cursed to himself silently. They must have heard the struggle. No doubt whoever it was would call the

police and this would all end in failure. But when he looked up, it was no wealthy Erebite he found.

It was the woman from Qi.

## Raif

“Hanne is not a monster; she is *my child!*” the distraught woman wailed as the commissar wrenched the adolescent from her arms. A burly lieutenant restrained the woman from behind with such force that she tumbled backwards, into his iron grip.

Raif was surprised; the child squirming in his arms was nearly thirteen. It was not often that *verstecktvolken* eluded gender screening so long. Sure enough, breast buds were beginning to form inside the child’s dress. “When was the last time your son saw a physician, Elisabeth?” Raif did not look at the mother as he addressed her, and did not expect an answer. It was a story that he had encountered before: a minor functionary in the Department of Records applies for reassignment to a remote province, forges his child’s medical documentation, and hopes for a fresh start in the hinterlands. Raif felt mild sympathy for the family, blinded by their compassion into entertaining their child’s delusions.

“Where are you taking her?” asked Elisabeth, “Where are you taking my baby?!”

Raif sighed, “Hansel Hoffman will be remanded into the Empire’s custody. He will prove a useful specimen to our alchemists, who are tirelessly resisting the witches’ foul magicks.”

Elisabeth’s eyes went wide, “I won’t let those butchers cut her open!”

Raif did not deign to respond. Elisabeth would be locked in a cell by nightfall. Her husband, Otto, apprehended earlier at his office, was most likely already in his. The couple would be charged with espionage and hanged. Raif motioned for the local police positioned outside to take Elisabeth into custody.

Raif handed Hanne to the lieutenant and turned back to the motor carriage. Alone, the lieutenant combatively clutched the collar of Hanne’s dress, pulling her to his face so that he

could hurl saliva into her open eyes. “Deviant,” he snarled at her shivering body. Before she could respond, he clocked her tear-stained cheek, a loose molar clattering to the filth under the frost. He tossed her into the burning snow and handcuffed her brutally, bruising her wrists. With one hand grasping her neck, his other thrust open the door of the carriage, and he catapulted her in. He smiled sinisterly as the resounding steel slammed shut. She shuddered in the dank darkness, the iciness of the metal bench and cantankerous cuffs slicing into her skin.

Looking back at the suffering child through the rearview mirror, Raif couldn’t help but remember his own past. He was twelve when his breasts began to bud. However, his family had connections so that his changes were a secret exception. Silence was guaranteed on the imperative that cunning sorcery be rooted out. Raif still remembered that first evening of many, when Mother began to iron the buds. The searing pain still reverberated through his muscle memory, the scars on his chest immutable. But Raif’s survival depended on conformity. He was grateful for the crucible, a necessary evil that Hanne’s parents were too weak to understand.

The motor carriage trundled along towards the town’s edge. Beyond the last row of houses lay a desolate white wasteland. Suddenly a figure limped out from behind one of the houses. Raif saw a light flash and felt a jolt as the front tire on his side of the carriage deflated. It was Otto Hoffman, blocking the path. The sleeve of his suit was ripped at the shoulder and he held a small pistol. He was shooting towards the motor carriage, but his aim was jittery and dreadful. The lieutenant laughed and pulled out his rifle. He called out to Otto, “Clear the path, old man! Or I’ll shoot!” A bullet zipped through the windshield and everyone in the car ducked. Reflexively, the lieutenant busted the windshield and shot Otto down.



“NO!” screamed Hanne, in an agonizing cry that petrified Raif so completely, he scrambled out of the car in a futile attempt to escape the echo. But he still couldn’t avoid the shrill vibrations piercing his bleeding eardrums. He spotted the lieutenant, still in the front seat. In an instant, the lieutenant’s body slumped over irregularly, as if his bones had disintegrated, his body transmogrified into a gelatinous mass. The engine of the carriage too was pulverized spontaneously, the entire front chassis crushed. Finally, the scream abated, and Raif could hear sobs from the back seat of the carriage.

Raif staggered to his feet and regained his bearings. Otto was sprawled face-down in the newly scarlet snow. Raif was perplexed by this father’s ultimate sacrifice for his child’s assumed identity. He began to silently weep, while fruitlessly obscuring his sobs from himself. There was a twinge of envy, but also of recognition: it was not the path his parents chose, but perhaps the one they should have.

Raif made his way over to the ruins of the carriage. Hanne was curled into a fetal position on the freezing, silver back seat. Her flaxen hair shrouded her forsaken, glistening face. Raif extended his trembling hand and uttered her name apologetically. Anxiously, the girl’s gaze rose, and Raif identified the weary bloodlust in her eyes. But she also was bereft of options, so she tentatively took his palm, the bruises on her wrists replaced by burns from deliquesced hand-cuffs. An uneasy yet resolute Raif explained as warmly as he could muster, “We’re going to find a safe place. The witches in the south will know how to help us.”

## Dmitri

Dmitri clutched the pistol in his inner coat pocket. He inhaled deeply, reassured by the instrument's persistent presence. A military band played a vociferous march in the distance, no doubt the approaching parade. The Steel Fist had engineered the plan's aspects perfectly; Dmitri's was the final role to fulfill. His fretfulness was aggravated by the bustling bunches of revelers around him. Their frenetic energy surfaced memories of simpler responsibilities, like when he and his peers plastered propaganda on government buildings after dusk. Now he was here, preparing to assassinate a public official in broad daylight. He was told that this act would reverberate through history's annals, but that pressure only rendered him anxious.

Cbrivojec was a sleepy town that straddled the Mlebrivoj river. Ancient buildings from the time of Melchor's bloody Imperium mingled with chapels from the advent of the Covenant. In recent years, the Rysi had contracted the master architect Dubois to oversee the construction of a new city center, a town square where stately administrative buildings and an ornate library flanked a fountain that featured a statue of the Grand Matron of the Covenant. Lorries imbued with magic floated down the streets while the sidewalks were lined with ad hoc market stands where the cunning women shouted to passerby, offering amulets, sigils, and other magical protections. But today, the city was unusually packed. Rysi loyalists from around the province had come to see the parade.

Dmitri pushed his way through the array and stole away into an alley. He gathered his nerves for a moment and listened. The military band's remote, aggressive melody was rapidly approaching. The deluge of people was viscous on either side of the boulevard and it would be

difficult for Dmitri to assume position. He was forced to resort to the contingency plan: reach the bomb planted in the town square. He regretted the multitude of citizens. It would not be good to kill fellow Szordenians. The military band was drawing closer, and Dmitri had to move.

The music was no longer muffled. The snares' sanguine shaking concussed Dimitri's skull as he wove through the profusion of people. The town square was a block away, but traversing this cacophonous crowd would take forever. The military band clamored the dogmatic Rysi anthem "Under the Bleeding Falcon". Clattering symbols and bombastic brass culminated in a chauvinistic display of national superiority. The band had reached the march's spritely trio and the fifes flitted about like birds. Dmitri instinctively raised his hands to shoo away the annoyance and slipped into a current of attendees headed towards the square.

He arrived at the square just in time; the band was around the corner and the picturesque palanquin was no doubt right behind it. He would spark the explosive's fuse as the band rounded the corner and scurry to a safe, observational distance. No doubt the bomb would provoke the masses into hysteria and cause them to disperse, and he would exploit the chaos to shoot the Vidamme and evade capture. Against the protests of the sartorial tourists, he sliced through the human sea and broke across the street to the square's central fountain. The bomb was planted under a bench but when he arrived, he found a little boy sitting there. Dmitri could feel his stomach drop. The jubilant, brunette boy was beaming, bobbing his cherubic head to the band's encroaching fanfare. Dmitri sat down next to the child and asked, "Where are your parents?"

"I don't know, sir," the boy replied, confused yet unperturbed, "I couldn't see well so I ran away to find a better spot to watch the parade. I do enjoy the music!"

“You need to go back and find your parents right now. You can’t be sitting here,” Dmitri warned him.

“But I have such a great view of the street from here!” the boy exclaimed, irritated.

Dmitri was running out of time. The marching band was about to turn the corner. He spotted the first police horse rounding the bend. He ducked under the bench and activated the timed detonator on the bomb. He grabbed the child’s arm and said, “Let’s go!”

The little boy jerked out of Dmitri’s grip and shrieked, “No!”

Dmitri didn’t want to make a scene, and the people around him were starting to stare suspiciously. So he made a quick decision. Grabbing the explosive from under the bench, he ran out into the middle of the street and started in the direction of the oncoming parade. The policewoman on horseback spotted him and started galloping in his direction. Dmitri reached for the gun in his jacket pocket, but it wasn’t there. It must have fallen out when he tussled with the little boy. The military band was now completely around the corner and the bomb had about a minute left before detonation. Panicked, Dmitri dove into the expectant congregation and screamed, “I’ve got a bomb!”

Panic gripped everyone around him and they poured out into the street, attempting to get out of the blast radius. The wave toppled the police officer from her horse, allowing Dmitri to continue on his way towards the palanquin, which was now rounding the corner. The stampede of terrified bystanders collided with the marching band, which finally stopped its obnoxious tune. The frenzied police horse reared right in front of Dmitri, who boarded its jittery back, seized its reigns, and bolted towards the palanquin. This was his one shot. He lobbed the bomb towards the Vidamme, who he could see was pulling out her snuff pouch. But she would have no

time to cast any spells, for the bomb landed square on the palanquin and exploded instantaneously.

The blast knocked Dmitri off of the horse and onto a stunned couple. He reoriented himself quickly. Most people around him were still gathering their senses but he could see police and guards sprinting towards the scene. The once painterly palanquin was a smoky demolition, the Vidamme no doubt blasted to bile and bits. His mission was accomplished, but he still needed to escape alive. He slid stealthily into a nearby backstreet and popped a maintenance hatch that led to the sewers. The stench was squalid, but fortifying, for it was the smell of freedom.